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Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant

Ronald A. Veenker

An episode in the Gilgamesh Epic is interpreted as an earlier, singular response to the puzzling lengthy generations of the antediluvian heroes in Mesopotamian tradition.

For many years scholars have been preoccupied with the literary history and structure of the Gilgamesh Epic (Kramer 1944). It appears that much of the eleven-tablet Akkadian version is based upon several independent Sumerian stories which are much shorter than epic length. They are "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living," "Gilgamesh, Inanna, and the Bull of Heaven," "The Death of Gilgamesh," "The Deluge," and "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld." A Semitic author, presumably during the Old Babylonian period, added to elements of the six Sumerian tales other legendary material of uncertain origin and wove the entire composition around the theme of immortality (Jacobsen 1976: 208-19; Kramer 1944: 18-19). Only the barest essentials of the original plots and characters remain.

In addition to the six Sumerian stories, the larger Akkadian epic contains material whose origin remains a mystery. Besides the famous flood story, the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic presents three short episodes based on a motif one might entitle "squandered opportunities for immortality." The first relates a contest between Gilgamesh and the "gods of slumber" (XI: 197-233; see *ANET*: 95-96); the second has been called "a bath in the Fountain of Youth" (XI: 234-57; see *ANET*: 96 and Oppenheim 1964: 263); the third episode and focal point of

this paper is called "Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant" (XI: 258-300; *ANET*: 96-97).

In the course of the first ten tablets of the epic, Gilgamesh has found his way with great difficulty to paradise (which in one part of the epic is surrounded by the "Waters of Death"). He has been told previously that Utnapishtim, the only human ever to obtain immortality, resides there. Surely Utnapishtim will disclose to him the secret of eternal life. Tablet XI opens with Gilgamesh posing his important question. In response, Utnapishtim fills the first 196 lines of the tablet telling how he survived the great flood and was granted immortality by virtue of his heroic feat. After hearing the story, Gilgamesh realizes his quest for immortality is in vain. Alas, he cannot duplicate the heroic feat of Utnapishtim, for the gods have repented of any further destruction of the world by deluge. However, hope is held out to him in a contest: Utnapishtim suggests that if Gilgamesh can resist sleep for six days and seven nights, the gods might grant him immortality. In a moment we realize that there is to be no real contest. No sooner does our hero settle to his haunches when "sleep, like a fog, blows upon him" (XI: 200)—a grim reminder of his mortality.

Following the contest, the author abruptly presents the second tale, the puzzling "Fountain of Youth" narrative (XI: 234-46):

Utnapishtim [says to him], to Urshanabi,
the boatman:
"Urshanabi, may the landing pl[ace not
rejoice in thee],
May the place of crossing renounce
thee!"

To him who wanders on its shore, deny
thou its shore!

The man thou hast led (hither), whose
body is covered with grime,
The grace of whose members skins have
distorted,
Take him, Urshanabi, and bring him to
the washing-place.

Let him wash off his grime in water clean
as snow,
Let him cast off his skins, let the sea carry
(them) away, that the fairness of his
body may be seen.

Let him renew the band round his head,
Let him put on a cloak to clothe his
nakedness,
That he may arrive in his city,
That he may achieve his journey.
Let not (his) cloak have a moldy cast,
Let it be wholly new."

After renewing himself in the mysterious waters, Gilgamesh boarded the boat with Urshanabi and set sail for home. That the Neo-Assyrian scribes considered this "fountain of youth" story an independent piece is indicated by the traditional horizontal lines separating it from what precedes and follows.¹

We now come to the third episode, "Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant" (XI: 256-300):

Gilgamesh and Urshanabi boarded the
boat,
[They launch]ed the boat on the
waves and they sailed away.
His spouse says to him, to Utnapishtim
the Faraway:
"Gilgamesh has come hither, toiling and
straining.
What wilt thou give (him) that he may
return to his land?"
At that he, Gilgamesh, raised up (his)
pole,
To bring the boat nigh to the shore.

Utnapishtim [says] to him, [to] Gilgamesh:

"Gilgamesh, thou hast come hither,
toiling and straining.

What shall I give thee that thou mayest
return to thy land?

I will disclose, O Gilgamesh, a hidden
thing,

And [a secret of the gods I will] tell thee:
This plant, like the buckthorn is [its . . .].
Its thorns will pr[ick thy hands] just as
does the rose.

If thy hands obtain the plant, [thou wilt
find new life]."

No sooner had Gilgamesh heard this,
Than he opened the wa[ter-pipe],
He tied heavy stones [to his feet].
They pulled him down into the deep [and
he saw the plant].

He took the plant, though it pricked his
hands].

He cut the heavy stones [from his feet].
The [s]ea cast him up upon its shore.
Gilgamesh says to him, to Urshanabi, the
boatman:

"Urshanabi, this plant is a plant apart,
Whereby a man may regain his life's
breath.

I will take it to ramparted Uruk,
Will cause [. . .] to eat the plant . . .!
Its name shall be 'Man Becomes Young
in Old Age.'

I myself shall eat (it)
And thus return to the state of my
youth."

After twenty leagues they broke off a
morsel,

After thirty (further) leagues they pre-
pared for the night.

Gilgamesh saw a well whose water was
cool.

He went down into it to bathe in the
water.

A serpent snuffed the fragrance of the
plant;

It came up [from the water] and carried
off the plant.

Going back it shed [its] slough.

Thereupon Gilgamesh sits down and
weeps,

His tears running down over his face.
[He took the hand] of Urshanabi, the
boatman:

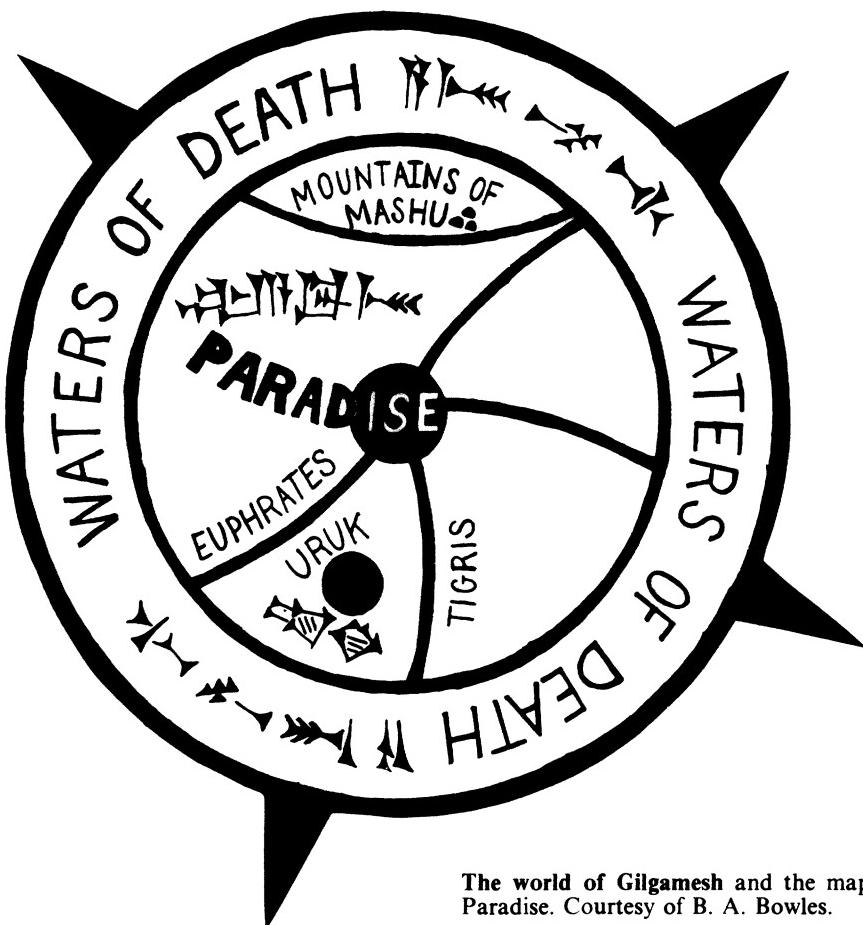
"[For] whom, Urshanabi, have my hands
toiled?

For whom is being spent the blood of my
heart?

I have not obtained a boon for myself.
For the earth-lion have I effected a boon!
And now the tide will bear (it) twenty
leagues away!

When I opened the water-pipe and [. . .]
the gear,

I found that which has been placed as a
sign for me: I shall withdraw,
And leave the boat on the shore!"



The world of Gilgamesh and the map of Paradise. Courtesy of B. A. Bowles.

The purpose of this discussion is to show that (1) the story of the magic plant was once separated from the larger epic, and that (2) although it enhances the motif of "squandered opportunity for immortality" within the epic, it was originally a story about antediluvian longevity.

That this story existed apart from the larger epic can be seen by examining the transitions between it and the tale immediately preceding. Lines 256-57 inform us that, after washing in the mysterious waters, "Gilgamesh and Urshanabi boarded the boat, [they launch]ed the boat on the waves (and) they sailed away." This statement indicates that at one time the preceding portion of the epic ended with the return to Uruk immediately following the episode of the "fountain of youth."

The legend of the magic plant begins as Utnapishtim's spouse supports Gilgamesh, begging her husband to give our hero one more opportunity to find the life he seeks. In order to add this last tale to the epic, the author must bring the boat back to the shore (ll. 261-

62)—a rather obvious but necessary literary ploy. Further evidence of the story's independence is found in the discrepancy between the description of the waters of Paradise here and another description found in Tablet X, column 4. According to the latter passage, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi, the ferryman, must cross the dread Waters of Death in order to reach Utnapishtim in Paradise. Should just one drop of those waters touch our hero he would certainly die (ANET: 92). The waters of the story in Tablet XI are clearly nontoxic, for Gilgamesh, without a moment's hesitation, dives into them (ll. 271-73). Furthermore, the fact that the magic plant has been continually nourished by these waters demonstrates their benign nature.

It appears, then, that the episode of the magic plant, while serving to dramatize the ultimate failure of Gilgamesh's quest, was *borrowed* and *adapted* to fit the themes of the Gilgamesh Epic. Questions immediately arise: What did the story teach before it was woven into the epic? How

might the ancients have entertained themselves with the tale? What sort of narrative could be concocted from the ingredients: Magic Plant, antediluvian hero, and deep water? The structure of the story, in its present form, remains sufficiently unaltered that one may reconstruct its original elements.

My thesis is that the tale of the magic plant, removed from its context in the Gilgamesh Epic, is a myth which offers an explanation for the extraordinary longevity of the antediluvians. In no other extant tale have the Mesopotamian writers given so much as a hint regarding the basis for their belief in the incredibly long-lived forbears. The well-known Sumerian King List (Oppenheim 1969: 265-66) records the reign of eight kings in five cities before the "flood swept over" the earth. The shortest regency is that of Ubar-tutu in Shuruppak: 18,600 years; the longest is En-men-lu-Anna in Bad-tibira: 43,200 years! Before such political tenure, the longevity of biblical Methuselah pales to insignificance.

First, let us consider the famous antediluvian Utnapishtim, the central figure in the tale. His presence is necessary to provide the link between the civilizations before and after the deluge. The poet tells us at the very beginning of the epic that Gilgamesh "brought back knowledge from times

before the flood," and that "he saw the abyss," i.e., the watery deep (I: i: 6). No other figure from the literature of ancient Mesopotamia could reveal to us the secret of the extreme longevity enjoyed by those mysterious kings of the ancient Sumerian city-states.

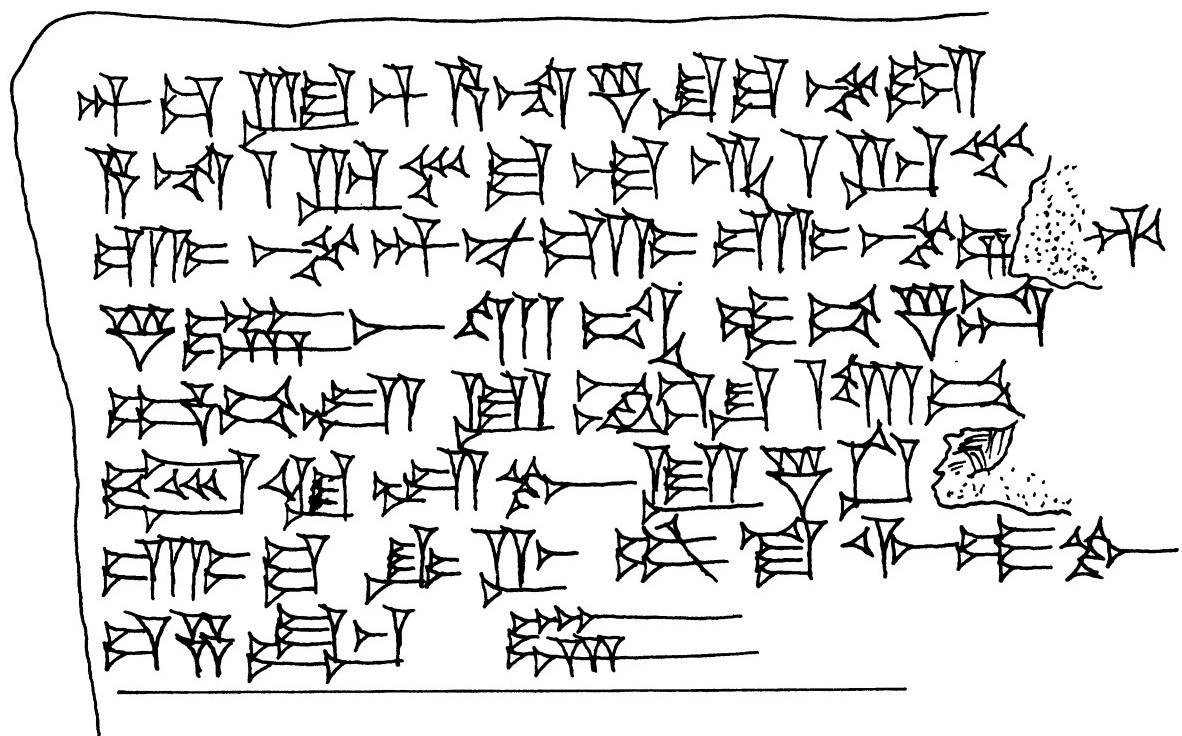
Second, notice that the plant does not offer the boon of true immortality which Gilgamesh seeks throughout the epic, but merely the sop of rejuvenation: "Its name shall be 'Man Becomes Young in Old Age'" (XI: 281). The motif of longevity is certainly more correctly applied to antediluvians than to Gilgamesh in search of immortality. Neither Mesopotamian tradition nor the Bible suggest that the generations before the flood possessed immortality—only unusual longevity. Consider now the location of the plant. Its whereabouts are known only to Utnapishtim, since he, by virtue of surviving the flood, is acquainted with antediluvian terrain. Why is the plant inaccessible to mankind in the postdiluvian era? It is found in the most remote region of the earth—Paradise. As though that were not enough, it is growing deep beneath the water. Are these the waters of the great flood? Certainly, since Utnapishtim, who remembers the earth before the flood waters came, is the only one who can tell us where to dive for the plant. What more powerful symbol of

the flood than a doubly forbidding barrier between postdiluvian man and his more durable forbear? This plant, this hope for longer life, is not only as remote as Paradise, but is buried deep beneath the waters of the deluge!

So the skeleton of the myth becomes clear: The antediluvian kings, perhaps all men, had access to the plant of rejuvenation before the gods concealed it under the waters of the flood. These waters which separated the long-lived and short-lived kings of the Sumerian King List also separate postdiluvian society from the secret of rejuvenation, the miraculous plant. Furthermore, the myth also points out that ancient man, not unlike ourselves, raised questions about this longevity. What has long puzzled modern theologians and students of the Bible was similarly perplexing to the ancients and gave rise to this etiological myth.

While literary analysis has taken us about as far as we can reasonably expect in reconstructing the tale of the magic plant, we might ask what sort of worldviews were held in ancient Mesopo-

Hand copy of a cuneiform tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic (Tablet XI: lines 278-82). Translation: "Urshanabi, this is a plant apart, whereby a man may regain his life's breath . . . Its name shall be 'Man Becomes Young in Old Age.'"



tamia which would provide a background for our story. The motif of a rejuvenating plant as well as that of watery depths suggests immediately the domain of the wise and beneficent Ea. This deity (known in Sumerian as 'Enki') is well known as the "Lord of the Apsû," i.e., the sweet waters beneath the earth which feed springs and rivers (Jacobsen 1976: 111). He was the patron deity of the ancient city Eridu, where he was worshipped as the benevolent fish-god. Even more common are the references to Ea as the benefactor of all mankind who is the "Lord of Wisdom." Since all the secrets of heaven and earth are his, he and his son Marduk are masters of the priests whose task is to perform exorcisms and other magical-medicinal rituals (Oppenheim 1964: 195; Saggs 1962: 292-95; Römer 1969: 129). In the Atrahasis Epic, Ea helped mankind survive the wicked plan of the gods to send plague, drought, and flood upon the earth. Again in the Gilgamesh Epic, it was Ea who took pity upon humans, warning Utnapishtim to build an ark to escape the deluge. So Ea, who knows magic and incantations, is also predisposed to help human beings who are in desperate need.

His connection with the regions under the earth also prompts us to mention his interest in plants. In the myth of Enki and Ninhursaga, Lord Ea

is the creator and sustainer of all primal plants (Jacobsen 1976: 112-13; Kramer 1969a: 37-41). In the story of Inanna's descent to the netherworld we read (Kramer 1969b: 54, ll. 65-67):

Father Enki, the lord of wisdom,
Who knows the Plant of life,²
Who knows the water of life,
He will surely bring me to life.

There is an Assyrian incantation which states: "After Anu had begotten the heavens and Ea had established the plants in the world below . . ." (Lambert and Millard 1969: 166-67). From this we learn that not only does Ea create plants, but he nurtures them in his marine world beneath the earth. The Atrahasis story contains a similar notion. After Enlil made the decision to destroy mankind, he posted guards over all the critical regions of the universe to make certain that no one would help the ill-fated earthlings. He decreed that Anu would guard the upper regions of heaven, that Sin and Nergal would be posted in Middle Earth, and that Ea would guard "the bolt, the bar of the Sea, together with his plants" in the subterranean waters (Lambert and Millard 1969: 117, 166-67). How could these plants have survived the poisonous salt waters of the evil sea? An ancient cosmological myth, the Eridu

Creation Story, provides the answer (Heidel 1942: 62, ll. 1-13). It says that before creation, there was no earth, no cities, not even the *apsû* existed. There was only Tiamat, the salt water deep. At that time a certain god made a fresh-water spring which was simply a fresh-water "pipeline" (*rātu*) into the salt sea; then he made the *apsû* and situated Eridu upon it. It has been suggested that this "pipeline" nourished and sustained Ea's plants of the deep (Speiser 1969: 96, n. 232). If that is the case, it certainly provides an explanation for a similar notion in the story of "Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant." When Gilgamesh went in search of the plant we are told that "he opened the water-pipe (*rātu*)" and descended to the *apsû*, the sweet waters, Ea's abode (XI: 271-73). Perhaps this connection between Gilgamesh's descent and the water-pipe of the deep is further alluded to in the incipit to the Epic: *ša nagba īmuru* "he who has seen the abyss," or the *apsû* where Ea guards his plants.

Ea's son Marduk, often mentioned in texts dealing with exorcism and medicine, is frequently called by the name of Asalluhi. One such text reads: "May Asalluhi, patron god of exorcism, absolve you by means of the plants of the mountains and the plants of the deep" (Biggs 1967: 17:15). And in a similar passage (Craig 1895: 59, ll. 1-5):

An Akkadian cylinder seal impression showing the god of life-giving waters, Ea. Courtesy of Frederick A. Praeger.





An Akkadian cylinder seal impression showing Gilgamesh wrestling with a lion. In the center a triple plant and at the right a dedicatory inscription naming the son of Abilum, a scribe. Courtesy of Batchworth Press.

Asalluhi, the exorcist of the gods,
Marduk, the holy god, exorcist of the
gods,
King of the *apsû*, whose incantation
means life,
Asalluhi, exorcist of the gods, who brings
the dead to life,
[Giver of] the plant of life, who purifies
heaven and earth

Note further Ea's instructions to Marduk regarding a ritual and incantation against bewitchment: "Go, my son Marduk! Give him your pure drink of life, let him eat the plant of life" (Saggs 1962: 304). Thus Ea, so willing to aid the antediluvians, and his son Marduk know the mysteries of the deep as well as the cultivation and use of magic plants.

It has now become clear that the story of "Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant" was once a separate and independent tale. Its central figure Gilgamesh, the survivor of the flood, as well as the elements of a magic plant and waters of the deluge, have led us to the inescapable conclusion that the story in its original form was a myth accounting for the belief in antediluvian longevity. Furthermore, the mythological world-views of the ancient Near East, culled from a variety of sources, provide the original story with a comfortable environment. "Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant" is indeed at home in the thought-world of ancient Mesopotamia.

Of course, most interest in the antediluvians stems from the stories in the early chapters of Genesis. For more than 100 years, scholars have been tantalized by the many parallels in Mesopotamian literature to the prehistoric motifs of the Bible. The idea that the Genesis flood narratives are based on Babylonian forerunners is not without controversy. However, the close

literary parallels between the so-called "J" flood story and Gilgamesh XI cannot be brushed aside. It is very difficult to imagine that the episode of the birds (Gen 8:6-12) is not based on the very similar story in Tablet XI: 145-54 (Lambert 1965: 291-92; Heidel 1946: 224-69). Furthermore, the behavior of Yahweh at the sacrifice in Gen 8:20-21 is astonishingly similar in tone to the very gross story of the gods who, having repented of their evil plan, are "crowding like flies about the sacrificer" (XI: 155-61). Obviously, the Yahwist has in mind a monotheistic revision of the Babylonian tradition. One must demonstrate that God would not act irrationally in bringing about the deluge. The blame must be placed upon sinful mankind who is indeed deserving of punishment. Notice that the biblical narrative totally ignores the deceitful plan of the god Ea to lie to the citizens of Shurrupak about the impending disaster (XI: 32-47). Biblical justice demands that humans, while deserving punishment, should not be deceived by Yahweh. Further offence is avoided by a slight change in the door-closing episode. In XI: 94-95, Puzur-Amurri battens down the hatches of the ark only to remain behind, short-term heir to the palace of the city.³ In order to remove the moral problem brought forward by the necessity of someone's remaining outside the craft after having participated in the project, Yahweh himself closes the door to Noah's ark (Gen 7:16b). The closing of a door is too small and insignificant a detail for two authors to include independently. Gen 7:16b is a moral comment on Gilgamesh XI: 94-95. However, it is not appropriate to say more about such matters here. What can be learned from literary

comparisons of biblical and Babylonian flood traditions has been most ably set forth by T. Frymer-Kensky (1977).

The puzzling fact remains that the Bible does not offer us an explanation for the long-lived generations before the flood. Even extrabiblical Jewish legends leave us wondering. Rabbinic traditions abound regarding the durability of the generations before the deluge. It is said they suffered neither pain nor disease, that they knew neither toil nor care because, by means of magic, they made sure that the yield of one harvest would be sufficient for forty years. They gave birth after a few day's pregnancy and their offspring walked and talked immediately.

There are some allusions as well to magic plants. The book of Enoch, commenting upon the encounter between human and divine beings in Gen 6:1-4, says that the humans were taught the arts and crafts of civilization, including the efficacy of plants. However, this story intends nothing more than to account for the origin of human medical knowledge.

Another legend informs us that shortly before his demise Adam took sick (an event whose uniqueness caused all manner of curiosity among his contemporaries) and wished desperately to be healed. He sent Eve and Seth to Paradise to procure for him the oil of life which flows from the tree of mercy. At the gates of the garden, Michael refused their request, informing them that only at the time of the resurrection will the pious receive the benefits of such anointing. (For the rabbinic material mentioned above, see Ginzburg 1909: 93-94; 153-74.)

None of these traditions has demonstrated features of an etiological

Snake eating a plant. Courtesy of B. A. Bowles.



myth of antediluvian longevity. It appears that we possess no tradition, biblical or otherwise, which indicates ancient Hebrew knowledge of an etiological story similar to our plant myth. "Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant" stands alone as literary evidence that the ancients too required an explanation for the tradition of antediluvian longevity.⁴

The Snake

Within the narratives of the plant myth there is a short but fascinating myth about the snake. Gilgamesh XI: 287-89 provides a story which answers the question: "Why does the serpent shed his skin?" i.e., why should the snake receive rejuvenation rather than mankind? The answer is clear: the serpent has the ability to identify magic plants by sniffing their fragrance. The same story is told in the ancient Greek tale, "The Resurrection of Glaucus" (Frazer 1921, vol. I: 301-13). According to Apollodorus, there was a certain Polyidus of Argos who, while visiting the isle of Crete, was selected from a group of diviners to make a search for the lost lad Glaucus. It was soon

discovered that the boy had fallen headlong into a jar of honey and was drowned. His father, insisting that Polyidus should have found the lad alive, shut the poor traveler in the tomb with the body of Glaucus. While contemplating his predicament, Polyidus observed a snake slithering slowly toward the corpse. Seizing a stone, he threw it and killed the viper, insuring that no worse fate would befall him. A second serpent appeared, spied its dead mate, and left only to return with a herb. No sooner had the serpent placed the plant upon the dead snake than it came to life. Polyidus had the presence of mind to press the same plant to the body of Glaucus with the result that the lad was restored to life.

The motif of the serpent's gift is very common in world literature. Tales nearly identical to this one can be found in the folk literature of Germany, Lithuania, Russia, Turkey, Poland, Italy, and Armenia (Frazer 1921, vol. II: 363-70). Somehow the same tale has come to the soil of the United States. Here is one version which is typical of the Appalachian culture (Wiggington 1972: 299-300):

They was two fellas a'goin' along one time in th' woods, an' saw two snakes a'tangled up fightin'. They just stopped an' watched 'em. It was a big black snake and a rattlesnake. Th' black snake'd work all th' time t'get wrapped around an' get up next t'his neck'n'head, y'know. Rattlesnake, he'd keep bitin'im an' pushin'im back.

An' said directly that black snake just quit an' wheeled an' run. Said, "I reckon th'fight's over." It wadn't though, fer here he come back, an' they hooked up fer a fight again. An' said directly th' rattlesnake pecked'im again, an' he fit just a little mores with'im and took off in th' same direction he did in th' first.

So when he come back an' they went t'fightin', why, he bit'im again. And while they's doin' th'fightin', way I always heered it, one a'these men foller'd th' black snake. An' there was a kind'a a bunch a weeds a'standin' there, an' that black snake went out a lookin' about an' directly he see'd it an' made a run fer' it and grabbed off some'a it an'eat it, and back he went fer his fight.

An' that man reached down there an' just pulled that up an' had it in his hand? An' th' next time that black snake went back fer his weed, he couldn't find it since th' man had pulled it up. He hunted an' hunted around there an' couldn't find any like it, an' directly he sorta keeled over on his side, an' in a few minutes he'u'z dead.

Never knowed what weed it was, but looks suspicious like it might work fer humans.

Every semester when teaching the Gilgamesh Epic, I recount a version of the Appalachian story. Invariably a student will volunteer, "That's right! It happened to my gran'daddy just like that!" Although students frequently have great difficulty accepting the Near Eastern myths as meaningful in any sense, when the same story is placed in their cultural milieu, with only slightly different dress, and the informant claims to know the one to whom this happened, it makes all the difference in the world.

Notes

¹See Thompson 1930, pls. 51 and 52. Notice that of the several tablets containing this portion of the epic, only one (K3375) omits the dividers.

²For the phrase *ú.nam.ti.la* we translate: "Plant of Life." See also Oppenheim 1964: 263.

³Translating ll. 94-95: "For (his) final caulking of the ship, I gave the palace along with its contents to Puzur-Amurri, the boatwright."

⁴Josephus (Thackeray 1930: sections 105-6) speaks briefly to the issue suggesting somewhat "scientifically" that their diet was conducive to longevity. Moreover, he suggests, it was necessary for them to live through at least one complete "great year" (some sort of greater planetary cycle requiring from 350-700 years) in order to learn astronomy. However, one can scarcely refer to Josephus' comments as "an ancient etiological myth."

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